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UTILITY PATENT APPLICATION

FOR

Footrest Tuck Mechanism

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Footrest Tuck Mechanism

Technical Field

The present invention pertains to maneuverability improvements to personal transporters including self-propelled wheelchairs.

Background of the Invention

Personal transporters that may be used by handicapped persons, may be self-propelled and user-guidable, and, further, may entail stabilization in one or more of the fore-aft or lateral planes, such as when no more than two wheels are in surface contact at a time. More particularly, such transporters may include one or more clusters of wheels, with wheels in each cluster capable of being motor-driven independently of the cluster in its entirety. One example of such a transporter is described in a patent to Kamen *et al.*, U.S. Patent No. 5,701,965, which is incorporated herein by reference. The utility of such transporters often depends on the transporter's maneuverability and weight since these transporters frequently need to carry users in confined spaces and for extended periods of time subject to limited battery charges..

Summary of the Invention

The first embodiment of the invention is a transporter for carrying a payload over a surface. The transporter includes a surface-contacting module, a power base and a support for a payload. The power base is pivotally coupled to the surface-contacting module and the support is pivotally coupled to the power base. The surface-contacting module to which the present invention refers contains at least two surface-contacting elements, such as wheels, and also any structure, such as a cluster arm, for supporting those surface-contacting elements that are in contact with the surface at any particular instant. The power base serves to mechanically couple the surface-contacting module to the payload support. As the power base pivots with respect to the surface-contacting module, the height of the support over the surface changes. The support pivots in a direction opposite to the pivoting of the power base, the support remaining substantially parallel to the surface.

In a further embodiment of the invention, a rest is included to stabilize the payload with

respect to the support. The rest is pivotally coupled to the support. In a specific embodiment of the invention, the rest is a footrest for a passenger on the transporter and the support includes a seat for the passenger. The rest is pivotally coupled to the support and power base through a four-bar linkage. In another embodiment, the rest coupled to the support and the powerbase, includes a follower, such as a roller follower, that is fixed with respect to the rest and movable with respect to the power base. The follower transfers part of the load from the rest to the support and/or the power base. The four-bar linkage transfers part of the load from the rest to support and to the powerbase through the lifting arm. The load transfer permits the power base to absorb some of the "shock" which would otherwise need to be borne wholly by the rest or the support, during a front impact to the rest.

In a further specific embodiment of the invention wherein the rest includes a follower, the power base is shaped so that the angle the rest makes with a vertical plane is determined by the rotation of the power base. This rest angle remains constant as the power base rotates until a specific power base rotation angle is attained. The specific angle corresponds to a minimum height of the support above the surface. When the power base is rotated beyond the specific angle, the rest tucks towards the power base. The increased height above the surface of the support and the rest allows the "tucked" rest to continue to clear the surface. This embodiment and the embodiment with the four-bar linkage, advantageously increases the maneuverability of the transporter by tucking the rest inward towards the ground contacting elements, thus, reducing the swing radius of the transporter.

In another specific embodiment of the invention, dual footrests are provided. The control mechanism linking the support height to the rotation of the power base, through the four-bar linkage, can differ for each footrest. Accordingly, it is possible to have independent control mechanisms for each footrest. Alternatively, when using the footrest with a follower, the profile of the power base, where the followers for the respective footrests contact the base can differ for each of the two footrests. This power base profile allows the tucking behavior of one footrest to be tailored differently from the behavior of the other footrest.

In another specific embodiment of the invention, a separate and independent motor is provided to drive a footrest. The motor can drive the coupled footrest to correspondingly move with respect to the power base or support height. With dual footrests, separate and independent motors can provide independent control of each footrest, thus, the footrests correspondingly

move with respect to the power base or support height. Accordingly, the motors can enable separate and independent tucking movements for each footrest.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The foregoing features of the invention will be more readily understood by reference to the following detailed description, taken with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Fig. 1 shows a side view of a self-balancing wheelchair according to a preferred embodiment of the invention with a four-bar linkage;

Figs. 2A-2E show a sequence of side views of the wheelchair with the four-bar linkage as the power base is rotated with respect to the surface-contacting module;

Fig. 3 shows a side view of a self-balancing wheelchair according to an embodiment of the invention with a follower; and

Figs. 4A-4F show a sequence of side views of the wheelchair with the follower as the power base is rotated with respect to the surface-contacting module.

Detailed Description of Specific Embodiments

Referring to Fig. 1, a side view is shown of a personal transporter, in this case a self-balancing wheelchair, designated generally by numeral **10,** according to a preferred embodiment of the invention. Transporter **10** may be described in terms of three fundamental structural components: a support **20** for carrying a passenger or other load, a power base **40** to which the support is coupled and a surface-contacting module **60**, to which the power base is coupled. The passenger or other load carried by the support **20** may be referred to herein and in any appended claims as a "payload." The surface-contacting module ("SCM") transports support **20** with any payload across the ground, or, equivalently, across any other surface. It has one or more elements that contact the ground, typically a pair of wheels. The power base **40** includes at least one power source and at least one motor that drive a ground-contacting element. A rest may be provided to aid in preventing the payload from slipping with respect to the support. In the embodiment shown in Fig. 1, a rest **80** is provided for support of a portion of the payload. Rest **80** may be a footrest, for example, for supporting one, or both, of the feet of a passenger.

Kamen '965, column 3, line 55 through column 5, line 44, describes a mechanism and process for automatically balanced operation of wheelchair **10** in an operating position that is unstable with respect to tipping when the motorized drive arrangement is not powered.

Referring further to Fig. 1, the modes of operation described herein apply to transporters having two or more surface-contacting elements **65**, where each surface-contacting element is movable about an axis **70**, which is substantially parallel to the surface, and where the axis **70** can itself be moved. For example, surface-contacting element **65** may be a wheel, as shown, in which case axis **70** corresponds to an axle about which the wheel rotates. Note that a forward wheel that rotates about axis **72** (shown in Fig. 3) has not been shown for clarity of illustration. In other embodiments of the invention, other surface contacting elements, as are known in the art, may be employed. Active control of the position of the axis **70** about which surface-contacting element **65** rotates may contribute to balancing of the transporter in that the position may be controlled in response to specified conditions of the traversed surface or specified modes of operation of the transporter. Motion of axis **70** of surface-contacting elements **65** is referred to in this description and in any appended claims as "cluster motion." Cluster motion is defined with respect to a second axis **75,** also parallel to the surface. Additionally, non-driven wheels may be provided for the transporter, such as caster or pilot wheels **100** coupled to the power base **40,** to the support **20** or the rest **80**.

As shown in Figs 2A through 2E (numbering in Fig. 1), power base **40** rotates about the SCM to which it is coupled by a pivot at axis **75**. Support **20** is pivotally coupled to the power base rotating about an axis **45** that is substantially parallel to the surface. As the power base rotates, support **20** rotates in the opposite direction such that the orientation of the support with respect to the surface remains substantially constant. Footrest **80** is pivotally coupled **95** to the support **20**, rotating about an axis that is also parallel to the surface. In a preferred embodiment, a linkage **90** is pivotally coupled to the footrest **80** and the powered lifting arm **42**. The linkage **90** may be slidably moveable. A slidably moveable linkage mechanism is useful for increasing or decreasing the range of the tuck and allowing the footrest to freely swing up and away from the seat about axis **95**. The arrangement of the following four points of contact form a four bar linkage: the pivot point **95**, coupling the footrest **80** to the support **20**; the pivot point **94**, coupling the linkage **90** to the footrest **80**; the pivot point **93**, coupling the powered lifting arm **42** to the support **20**; and the pivot point **91**, coupling the linkage **90** to the powered lifting arm **42**.

The linkage **90**, as part of the four-bar linkage, allows the rest to transfer some of the load that would otherwise be borne by the pivot point **95** and the support **20**. In other words, if this linkage **90** were not provided, the pivot point attaching the footrest to support **20** would need to be substantially more rugged as is the point of the support at which the pivot is attached, to carry the load. The support and the power base, acting through the linkage, may advantageously serve as a shock absorber for the load on the footrest and support if the wheelchair **10** footrest strikes an object.

Further, as shown in Figs. 2A through 2E, the four bar linkage, allows the footrest to maintain its pivot angle, φ, substantially constant with respect to a vertical plane until the seat is raised to a specified height above the surface. This feature allows the footrest to clear a curb as shown in Figure 2B. Above this specified height, the footrest begins to rotate towards the vertical, i.e., φ decreases. Thus, the footrest "tucks" towards the power base. Operationally, as the powerbase pivots to raise the support height, the powered lifting arm coupled to the linkage, pulls back the linkage. The linkage subsequently pulls back the pivotably coupled footrest towards the powerbase to tuck the footrest. The tuck of the footrest improves the maneuverability of the wheelchair by reducing the radius about which the footrest swings as the wheelchair turns. As the power base is rotated in the opposite direction, the height of the support above the surface decreases. When the specified height is reached, the footrest begins to pivot, increasing φ. Thus, the clearance of the footrest above the surface is maintained.

A stop **98** may be provided to inhibit rotation of the footrest past a specified angle to the vertical plane, facilitating rider comfort. In a preferred embodiment with a stop, when the transporter hits an obstacle, the force is transferred to the support **20**. This force transfer may result in a better distribution of the load. In an alternate embodiment, the stop can be placed on either the support **20**, at the point where the footrest is coupled to the support, or on the power base of the device.

In an alternate embodiment as shown in Fig. 3, a follower **90A**, rigidly coupled to the footrest **80** and moveably coupled to the powerbase **40** through a guidewheel **92A**, can attain similar functions as the four-bar linkage described above. Fig. 3 shows a side view of a self-balancing wheelchair according to an embodiment of the invention with the follower **90A**. As shown in Figs 4A through 4F and analogous to the four-bar linkage, the follower allows the power base to offload some of the load that would otherwise be borne by the pivot point and the

support. In other words, if this follower were not provided, the pivot point attaching the footrest to the support would need to be substantially more rugged as would the point of the support at which the pivot is attached, to carry the load. The power base via the follower advantageously acts as a shock absorber for the load on the footrest and support if the wheelchair **10** footrest strikes an object.

Figures 4A through 4F, also show the operation of the follower embodiment of the invention. Here, the follower allows the footrest to maintain its pivot angle, φ, substantially constant with respect to a vertical plane until the seat is raised to a specified height above the surface. This feature allows the footrest to clear a curb as shown Figure 4B. Above this specified height, the footrest begins to rotate towards the vertical, i.e., φ decreases. Thus, the footrest "tucks" towards the power base. The tuck of the footrest improves the maneuverability of the wheelchair by reducing the radius about which the footrest swings as the wheelchair turns. As the power base is rotated in the opposite direction, the height of the support above the surface decreases. When the specified height is reached, the footrest begins to pivot, increasing φ. Thus, the clearance of the footrest above the surface is maintained. Similarly, a stop **98A**, as shown in Fig. 3, may attain all the advantages of the invention as described above.

In another embodiment of the invention, dual footrests are provided. Each footrest is pivotally coupled **95** to the support **20**, rotating about an axis that is substantially parallel to the surface. In a preferred dual footrests embodiment, individual linkages **90** and the corresponding four-bar linkages, are pivotally coupled to each footrest and the power base. In an alternate embodiment with followers, the individual followers **90A** are rigidly coupled to each footrest and movably coupled to the power base through each follower's guide wheel **92A**. The profile of the power base where the guide wheels of the followers contact the base can differ for each of the footrests. In the dual footrests embodiment, the control mechanism for each of the footrests may differ and thus the footrests may operate independently. In this embodiment, one footrest may tuck towards the power base differently than the other as the support is raised above this surface. This embodiment can be used advantageously, for example, to reduce the radius about which the footrest swings if one leg of a user differs from the other. Examples of this situation would be for amputees or users with a leg in a cast.

In another embodiment, the footrest **80** is pivotally coupled **95** to the support **20**, rotating about an axis that is also parallel to the surface. The footrest may have an independent motor

driving it. The motor may drive the footrest to correspondingly move with the support height. In this embodiment, each footrest can have a separate motor as described above to enable independent control of the footrest correspondingly move with the support height. Such independent movements may also achieve the advantages of the dual footrests embodiment described above.

While the description of the preceding embodiments have described the transporter as a self-balancing wheelchair, the described embodiments are intended to be merely exemplary and numerous variations and modifications will be apparent to those skilled in the art. For example, the transporter need not be self-balancing and may include surface-contacting elements that stabilize the transporter to tipping in a fore-aft or lateral plane at substantially all times, e.g., a four wheeled wheelchair. The support may not include a seat for a passenger, but may include other devices for supporting a payload. The rest may be any device that tends to stabilize the payload with respect to the support.

Other variations and modifications are intended to be within the scope of the present invention as defined in the appended claims.